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Gut Feeling

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Gut Feeling

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by

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Abstract

Through curated space and abstracted sculptures that reference the viewer's body, *Gut Feeling*, acknowledges the viewer's experience as the focal point of the exhibition. I designed the whole gallery as an art object using both positive and negative space. The sculptures act as one unified system that guides the viewer through the exhibition in a counterclockwise rotation inward. The viewer follows the forms as they puncture through the walls of the gallery, while considering their own body's relationship to the forms being seen. The viewer directly engages with the scale of the forms, sculptural placement, and sensory experience; these elements stir humbleness in the viewer by tugging on the string that connects all of us despite our difference, our abject bodies.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part seeks to address the systems and historical factors that make up the museum's authority such as architecture, archives, rituals, and the viewer's role as a visual consumer. Part two focuses on my thesis exhibition *Gut Feeling* how it was developed and draws connections to the metaphorical body of the gallery and the viewer's own body. As an artist I believe it is important to critique the artwork in the space it is presented in, while reflecting on how artwork is developed, constructed, and conceptualized.

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Part 1:

Systems

I have always been interested in systems, and how structure is created for something to function organically. I am constantly dissecting systems of operation; the facade never satisfies me. I need to know the innerworkings in order to understand something. The human body is no different for me. Like many people, I seek out answers to address complications that arise within my own body. After a period of observation, trial, and error, the unique functionality of a body's system becomes predictable and manageable. I understand the world through this scientific methodical approach when evaluating how structures operate.

This process of evaluation also crosses over into my artistic practice. When a new material or tool is brought to my attention, I immediately deconstruct it. During my time in Northwest Arkansas, I have taken on many roles as Exhibition Coordinator and Preparatory Assistant; some of these roles include curating, staging, and installing exhibitions for galleries and museums. In these roles, I have been able to see the inner operations in the preparation and installation of exhibitions. I have experienced the hierarchy between curators, preparatory staff, and installation artists. I questioned how this system was created, who decided what was put on display, and how the history of museums played a role in the formation of this current structure. In curating my thesis exhibition, *Gut Feeling*, I made it a vital point to address the current art culture and structure of museums, galleries, and the development of the white cube, the preferred contemporary gallery space. To do this I pulled from my own experiences and referenced multiple exhibitions, established institutions, and historical writings.

My artwork is not separate from the art world. Therefore, it is my obligation as an artist and curator to fully understand the systems and institutions that drive our art viewing experience and to explicate their development and historical linage. To understand the context is to

understand how my artwork maybe portrayed by a curator in the future. My understanding of the systems art exists within allows me the opportunity to use some redesigned methodologies associated within those systems in a more participatory way for the viewer.

To understand the space of the museum, I will start with its body, the architecture. Looking at spaces such as the Saint Louis Art Museums, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the architecture immediately asserts its authority towards the viewer. The structures mimic ceremonial monuments such as temples, churches, and state buildings. Their monumental appearance displays power and draws from Greek and Roman architecture. The layout and movement through the space also places the viewer into a submissive state as they ascend multiple staircases and walk under massive pillars to enter the space (Duncan 46). The interior of the building is also designed as a sacred space; it creates a scripted environment. “The visitor does not think of the experience as a ritual, but the museum itself creates a process of ritual: the installation, layout of rooms, sequence of collections resembles traditional religious experiences (Duncan 48).” This constructed authority is present throughout the galleries in the museum; the authority of the wall text and the space limits how the viewer can engage with the artwork in an alternative way. Though *Gut Feeling* establishes its own ritual of moving the viewer through the exhibition in a counterclockwise rotation inward, it is not with the intention of establishing authority. It is instead designed to include the viewer in it.

Museums come from a history of authority, evolving from private collections contained in Wunderkammers, Kunstkammers, and Cabinets of Curiosities. These collections were created by the wealthiest of families, such as the Medici Family. Upon death, wealthy estates containing theses collections would be donated to the country, and they would later evolve into what we

know today as museums. While preserving these collections for historical and cultural reasons, countries also invest in museums as tourist attractions. Countries would use these donated collections as tools to display their power and wealth as was the original intention of these private collections.

The contemporary version of this ritualistic authority is the white cube. The white cube is absent of any distractions that might take away from the art itself. The space is therefore neutral with white walls and a bland floor that is often wood, concrete, or a neutral carpet. The arrangement of the artwork is also presented in a way that idealizes each piece. There is a regimented spacing between artworks and a routine hanging method that is consistent for all wall hung artwork. Sculptures are placed on white or neutral painted pedestals and centered in the room with space around them (O'Doherty 24-25). The white cube method has created the perfect atmosphere for artwork of the 21st century. According to Philip Fisher who points out that, "for the museum, the abstractness that results from the effacement of specific religious, political, or person symbolic features is the key feature" (Fisher 116-117). These elements shape the museums' culture and often dictate what is placed in certain galleries. The white cube method removes the contextual voices surrounding other hanging styles, such as religion and political connections, leaving each artwork with its own voice. An example being the Salon-Style Hang created by the Royal Academy that comes from a very religious and politically charged background. The Salon-Style Hang consists of paintings hung from floor to ceiling one on top of the other, often with linear or thematic organization.

Architecture is also something that has changed with the white cube method. Instead of the vaulted ceilings, pointed arches, and Parthenon references that hearken back to religious contexts as well as Greek and Roman culture, the white cube method is more interested in exploiting the

innovations that have come with the industrial revolution. Instead of the marble floors and columns, the new architectural esthetic is focused on glass and steel construction.

The strength of the white cube is the artworks ability to travel to multiple locations and not to be bound to a singular space such as altar paintings or site-specific pieces. The artwork can come to you now instead of you going to it (Berger 16-18). This is true for how technology has shaped our accessibility to artwork too, but I will talk about this more in the next chapter. With this freedom of movement there is the opportunity for curators to present artworks in dialogue with one another. Curators often show works centered around a topic that is relevant to their research, by paring works of art together to communicate a larger narrative. I will use Gallery 1 of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art as an example. As you walk into the gallery you are immediately confronted by Nari Ward's installation, *We the People*, which borrows the language used in the U.S. Constitution's Preamble. Directly across from this piece is a series of portraits, ranging in their date of completion and stylistic period, that portray different races, genders, classes, and cultures. In this space, the curators make a statement that these are the people the Constitution works towards. This statement also includes the viewer that is present in the space. Placing this curation in Gallery 1, Crystal Bridges also states that the viewers belong there (Besaw). Crystal Bridges statement of inclusion created in Gallery 1 is also present at its satellite location The Momentary. As visitors approach the building, they are welcomed by Tavares Strachan's large neon sign, *You Belong Here*. Strachan's sculpture implies that no matter who the visitor is they are welcome in the space.

Aside from curating exhibitions and creating narratives, museums are also responsible for archiving artworks. Archives are another level of power and wealth for museums as they participate in the art market, by buying and selling items to raise their value. As museums

purchase new acquisitions, they are also making a statement about what they believe is the most relevant and vital contributions to a particular time in history. They decide which artists are remembered through history and how they will tell the artists' story. Unfortunately, since 2008 only 11 percent of all acquisitions by prominent American museums were works by female artists. This number is even lower for women of color which only made up 3.3 percent of the 11 percent (Julia Halperin and Charlotte Burns). One might argue that there are not enough women working in the arts, but when we compare that to education statistics women earn 70% of Bachelors of Fine Arts, 65-75% of all Masters of Fine Arts degrees, and 46% of working artists are women (National Museum of Women in the Arts). A 2019 study titled, *Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums,* found that, "85% of artists were white and 87% are men," among 18 major U.S. Museums (Topaz et at., 2019). This means that women and artists of color are not being accounted for in history.

Another thing we must consider is the archives role of the museum. It is not only to preserve history, but to preserve an investment. Upon considering an acquisition, curators and collectors must consider the longevity of the material the artist has used in the construction of their artwork. For instance, works done on paper can only be on display one year out of ten or they experience damage from ultraviolet rays. During my various art handling positions, I have learned it is not unusual for museums to leverage their archives in order to have another museum change a frame or restore a particular artwork. Viewers see this in the form of an "Artwork on Loan." This approach cuts back on costs as they do not need a full-time conservator on staff, but it also might limit their decisions on what they purchase in the future. The preservation of artwork is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it ensures artwork can last for a far longer period of time, but it also restricts the viewer in many ways. Iconic works of art like Leonardo da

Vinci's painting, *Mona Lisa*, is constantly on display due to its popularity. However, the painting is roped off and behind bulletproof glass. In addition, many artworks are monitored by cameras and museum guards, which creates a distracting and pretentious viewing environment. I also question whether placing an artwork in the archive is a disservice. Yes, is preserves the artwork in history, but it also displaces the artwork from the period in which it originated. There is also a heavy critique surrounding museum text as it often causes educational and language barriers. The average viewer does not have the vocabulary or historical background to understand the terminology used in many of the texts accompanying the works.

In constructing, *Gut Feeling*, I was interested in constructing my own ritual of movement centered on creating an active viewer through an experience surrounding body. Each form in the exhibition brings a new level of interaction to promote engagement with the viewer included of a passive exclusionary viewing. *Gut Feeling* is intended to question how we consume artwork and the setting's role in this consumption. For inspiration I looked to alternative spaces that challenge traditional art viewing experiences that museums provide. A few of these spaces include Meow Wolf, Otherworld, The Mattress Factory, and The City Museum. While focusing on the viewer's experience in immersive instillation art spaces, the viewers are drawn into surreal environments and out of reality. Each space constructed to consider the viewer and their role as being a part of the installation and narrative.

I consider Christina A. West's, 2018 installation, *Screen,* installed at The Mattress Factory. In this installation, West altered a series of rooms that the viewer navigated through; it included doorways expanding and shrinking and walls becoming narrow. In each of these spaces, the viewer confronts a nude sculptured figure that is either to scale or smaller than the viewer. The special proportions matching the scale of the figures. This manipulation of space causes the

viewer to reference their body in relation to the space and to the figures that occupy it (West). I also consider Meow Wolf's, *The House of Eternal Return,* completely grounded in reality as an average 1980-90's house. However, as the viewer explores the space the house exposes portals to a surreal fictional space. A look into the refrigerator leads you into a brightly lit room like heaven, while the dryer unit exposes a hidden slide. With the interest being on the viewer's experience, it removes the artwork from just being about a historically visual interaction. It allows for the viewer to become a part of the narrative of the site no matter the original context of the installation design. Contrasting these interactive environments are the spaces of the museum, with a regimented set of rules that emphasize preservation and limit viewer interaction.

With these historical systems and complexities in mind, *Gut Feeling* takes place in the University of Arkansas Sculpture Gallery. This space is the definition of contemporary white cube gallery with white walls, bare concrete floors, and gallery windows that stretch the length of one wall and faces the interior of the building (Fig. 1). Though this space mimics most white cube galleries, it is unique in its wall height and balcony that overlooks the space. In designing *Gut Feeling*, I built from the existing structures, rituals, and authorities that are defined by the museums to focus on the viewer's experience rather than an authority that glorifies art objects. I designed each form to fit uniquely in the gallery while acting as a trojan horse. The forms existing in the space of the white cube, being labeled as an art object while simultaneously critiquing the space by puncturing and ensnaring the walls of the gallery. They do not behave like normal sculptural objects on a pedestal or hang at sixty inches like a painting. Instead, they are organic whimsical forms that interact with the walls at untraditional heights. To promote an active viewer instead of a passive viewer, as the focus is directed more on the viewer's journey around the space, than the objects themselves. The forms acknowledge the viewer's body in their

movement, scale, sound, and openness to walk through and around them. In a way, this makes the viewer a part of the space, and does not separate the art objects from the viewer's experience. *Gut Feeling* adds to the growing institutional critique and desire for a more inclusive viewing experience. It is less concerned with the archival quality or the maintaining of the fiction of the "Artistic Genius," where the viewer can only act as a witness to an art object (Berger 84, 88). Instead, *Gut Feeling* is interested in creating a subversive space similar that of Meow Wolf, Otherworld, The Mattress Factory, and The City Museum. Transforming the space of the white cube into an alternative art viewing experience that acknowledges its linage while critiquing it.

How Media Has Changed the Viewing Experience

In his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin discusses a shift in perception in the twentieth century as the Postindustrial Revolution produced film and photography. He writes about humanities new modes of seeing, and he feared the consequences. One of the recent effects of the Postindustrial Revolution, is the Internet Age which has brought social media and forever affected how we consume artwork. Photography revolutionized how we view things in the world. It was the first time that an experience could come to the viewer. Instead of visiting a landmark or location halfway around the world, you can instead view an image. It was also the first time that the structure of perception was changed to one of submission. "Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed (Benjamin 238)." Now let's compare this idea to a platform like social media. The average person spends 144 minutes a day on social media and only spends about five seconds with an individual post. The individual person is intaking well over 1000 posts per day. Everything is consumed so rapidly that the viewer retains nothing. As a result, this phenomenon has also affected how we consume artwork in museums. The average viewer spends fifteen to twenty seconds with a work of art. The rapid viewing time is not nearly enough time for the viewer to connect physically or mentally with artwork (Lubin).

However, Sarah Urist Green, of the *Art Assignment*, would argue that with the development of social media we have created a platform to consume more artwork and create new unexpected dialogues with the artwork all over the world. She also points out that platforms like Instagram give artists freedom to represent themselves and tailor the perception of their artwork in a non-gallery or commercial setting. However, she also questions what happens when

we take a photo of a work of art? “Does photographing it extend our engagement or does it take the place of what might have been a more fulfilling experience (Green)?” Walter Benjamin argues that when an artwork is mechanically reproduced the aura or authority within the singular art object is lost (Benjamin). In the study, “How the Intention To Share Can Undermine Enjoyment,” found that taking photos with the intention to share with others will reduce enjoyment of an experience and increase self-presentational concerns (Alixandra).

Considering how vision has become about rapid consumption, I am interested it *Gut Feeling* being an exhibition that emphasis a slowed down experiential space. I consider the slow food movement of the 1980s, which was a critique of the fast-food industry, and it emphasized that great food takes time to create and to enjoy. David Lubin addresses this concept in his article, “Slow Looking,” which explores the currently frantic fast paced consumer culture as it relates to the contemporary art viewer. Lubin emphasis the importance of slow looking as a practice to create mindfulness, so the viewer can be physically and psychologically present with the work of art. To coax the viewer into an experience that makes them physically and psychologically present with the artwork and their bodies, I have specifically implemented key interactive elements into the exhibition such as scale, placement, and one on one interactions with sound and reflections. The large bodily forms make the viewer assess their own body’s relationship to the forms (Fig. 9). The arrangement leads the viewer through the gallery in a counterclockwise motion, the sculptures and lighting create one continuous system. The structures mimic the viewer’s movement around the space and allow for the viewer to move around, under, and pass through them. *The Cave* provides some of the most interactive components. The sounds the viewer makes in cavern are recorded manipulated then played back to the viewer. Allowing for a direct interaction with the space. A mirror film is placed on the

gallery window reflecting the viewer's body before entering the space preparing them to directly consider their body before entering the space (Fig. 4). They are again met with their reflection in *The Cave* which reflects their images as being apart of the exhibition (Fig. 13).

Gut Feeling was delayed and then rendered inaccessible to viewers due to COVID-19. As I presented images and did Zoom tours online. I had to be content with this highly physical exhibition being presented in an online format. I consider the writings of John Berger's, *Way of Seeing*, when considering what is gained and lost by presenting, *Gut Feeling*, online. Berger, like Benjamin, is interested in how vision changed with the evolution of the camera and living in a time when artwork can come to the viewer in the form of a reproduction. On the one hand, the ability to create reproduction allows for the artwork to be more accessible to a wider range of audience. However, he argues that the context of the artwork shifts drastically as the particular artwork is not presented in the initially intended environment such as period rooms or site-specific spaces like churches (Berger 19, 20). In the case of, *Gut Feeling*, it would not be presented in the space of the white cube. Yes, it would be photographed in a white cube, but the manner in which the viewer consumes it on a digital format or print changes the space it was intended to be viewed in. It is now consumed in a domestic space on a phone or in a browser that has other tabs, programs, and advertisements flooding the viewer while they are trying to take in this experience that was intended to be taken in slowly and involve the viewer exploring their own body in relation to the pieces. The scale and mass of the objects were key to the exhibition. The viewer's experience is therefore restricted while consuming the exhibition in digital or printed formats. They cannot contribute to generating sound in T*he Cave* or view their reflection in the environment of the exhibition. Through the images of the exhibition and the zoom tour cannot replace the in person experience that *Gut Feeling* was designed for it did bring

unexpected results. On a digital platform it brought the experience to a variety of people who would have otherwise not been able to view the exhibition in person even if COVID- 19 was not present. Not being able to physically view the exhibition also lead to a reaction of desire from many viewers.

Part 2:

Exhibition Overview

While creating, *Gut Feeling*, I considered the positive and negative space of the gallery equally. The positive abstracted forms referencing the body and promoting movement through the space, while the negative space causes the viewer to move in a counterclockwise, inward rotation around the gallery. Implied lines create movement between forms while also referencing the flow of the gallery. The segments having the capacity to be read as individual forms or as one massive singular form. The sculptural placement is also key as it considers how close the viewer would be passing by the forms. This proximity to the viewer assists in directing them through the space. The textural foreign material that is a stand in for skin evokes a feeling of wonder, sublime, and tension, causes the viewer to confront their abject body. Abject being a body that defies its boundaries and invokes a grotesque feeling.

As the viewer enters the building, they are immediately confronted with the six-foot bodily form, *Segment 1* (Fig. 2). The sculpture's placement in relation to the exterior door creates a warm contrast in relation to its cool surroundings, demanding attention. The viewer's height is mimicked in the form as it occupies their same space (Fig. 3). As this form exists on the exterior of the gallery, I consider the divide that happens between artwork that is viewed in galleries and museums versus artwork that is presented in a public space. The stage of the gallery creates a platform for admiration towards objects and enhances the aura of the object, its originality and authenticity. In a public space, artwork acts as the backdrop to the actual intention of space; it is not the focal point of the space. For example, people do not go to a restaurant or doctor's office because they enjoy the artwork in that space, but instead the artwork is secondary. It can add to the atmosphere, but it is not the primary reason for going to that space. Artworks occupying

public spaces often create spontaneous interactions as it invades the space of an unexpected viewer. I would note that outdoor public sculpture parks are the exception to this idea.

Another argument I consider is the perceived value of artwork in public spaces. Why is it viewed as being less valuable than an artwork in a museum or gallery? An example being if you were to place the same artwork in a McDonalds and then place it in a museum, would the artwork only be taken seriously in the space of the museum and why? If so, is space and place the only thing driving the art market? I place *Segment 1* on the exterior of the gallery to be a place holder for these questions, the wall and gallery glass severing its connection to the pedestal the gallery provides. I have considered these questions often since moving to Northwest Arkansas as many of the exhibition opportunities are in restaurants or businesses that are interested in artwork as a backdrop to the day to day activities.

Segment 1 is a stand in for the abject body that exists outside the gallery. Caslav Covino writes that the abject body continuously violates its own boundaries, which is defined by a human's epidermis. By violating this boundary, it takes away our wish for physical self-control. "We disavow our excretory bodies because they are signs of disorder, reminders of the body's ambitious limits….and of its ultimate death (Covino 17)." By placing this form on the exterior of the gallery it does not conform to the rules of the gallery, but also is not placed on the same pedestal that the gallery provides. It is instead in the realm of spontaneous interaction.

As the viewer peers into the exhibition through a glass wall that acts as the gallery's bodily membrane, they immediately find *Segment 1* appears to continue through the wall. This next from that is on the interior of the gallery, *Segment 2*, cannot be fully experienced from the glass wall of the gallery, promoting the viewer to enter the space and finish the visual connection. As the viewer proceeds towards the gallery entrance, they are met with their own

reflection on the gallery glass (Fig. 4). A mirror film placed on the gallery acts as an exhibition title that is generally place in this location. The exhibition title is read at the start of the exhibition and generally placed prior to entry or at the start of the exhibition. This title creates a mindset the viewer should consider when exploring the exhibition. In this case the viewer is only met with their reflection as they enter the space preparing them to consider their own body before entering the space.

Once inside, the viewer can pick up where *Segment 1,* leaves off with *Segment 2* (Fig. 5). The visual connection between *Segment 1* and *Segment 2* implies that the forms are one unit that punctures the gallery wall, living in both the external public space and the internal space of the white cube. *Segment 2*, appears top heavy; however, it straddles the interior corner of the gallery weightlessly before inserting itself into the wall at a height far above the viewer (Fig.6). It is worth note that this form is contained inside the gallery walls and therefore contained in the metaphorical body of the gallery. It does not deal with the abject body as the exterior form does. Instead it starts to play into the role of "art object." It creates its own ritual of viewing but, is quick to assert itself as not being the traditional artwork hung at 60 inches by a wire. It instead is interested in creating an active viewer by asking them to engage parts of their bodies that are uncommon in the gallery setting. Each segment in the exhibition adds a new that engages the viewer's body such as gazing up, walking through and around, and making noise. These interactions build a relationship between the viewer and the forms.

An implied line is created between *Segment 2 and 3* (Fig. 7) and then between *Segment 3 and 4* (Fig. 9). The viewer is left to imagine what the forms are doing beyond the walls of the space but, it is certain that they operate similar to Segment 1. They are a form of abject body that is defying its boundaries. Soft red lighting is used to assist the viewer in following this implied

line that visually links the forms together. The light acts as a blister, exposing the path the forms travel beyond the wall. The light also creates a warm atmosphere inside the gallery that draws viewers inside and contrasts the space of the cool blue toned building.

Scale and placement are another important factor in creating an active viewer. The large bodily forms causing the view to assess their own bodies in relation to the forms. The viewer physically being able to walk around and inside of the forms (Fig. 9). *Segment 3* straddles and coils around a corner of the gallery at a height of fourteen foot (Fig. 8). Its dynamic height allows the viewer to walk under and around the form, experiencing multiple unique perspectives of the form. *Segment 4*, a twelve-foot tall form extends out from the gallery wall and twists as it spirals downward to the floor (Fig. 9). During its transition to the floor, the *Segment 4* pushes away from the wall leaving room for the viewer to move under and around the form. The corkscrew of the form references the movement of the viewer as they have traveled around the space in a counterclockwise direction and the gaze of their eyes, staring up high and gradually descending lower. *Segment 3 and 4* reference the tension and anxiety associated with the abject body and our relationship to our mortality. With proximity to the viewer, the forms are meant to mimic anxiety and discomfort associated with bodily excretions.

With the use of color lighting, scale, and placement the sculptural forms deflate the gallery and begin to tie in architectural elements that are present in the gallery is the ductwork (Fig. 1). The soft red light bounces off the walls and a red glow hitting the ductwork. Their scale and diameter of the pipes mimicking the bodily forms below. As ductwork is a series of tubes running in and out of the space, it functions similarly as it belongs to a larger unseen system.

The last form in the exhibition and perhaps the most interactive is *The Cave* (Fig. 10). Specifically targeted at creating an active viewer, *The Cave* consists of a walk-through

experiential space, a live auditory interaction piece and mirror. Coming out of the floor and expanding upward at a height of fourteen feet the cavern form straddles the gallery window. The cavern is easily able to accommodate multiple viewers at once. The auditory component of the artwork is comprised of a live microphone that is hidden inside the folds of *The Cave* (Fig. 11). This mic records the viewers interactions inside the space. The recorded audio is manipulated and in real time it is filtered to include a pitch change, a reverb, and an echo (Fig. 13). This is done with the intention of giving the viewer a feeling of being in a larger voluminous space. The delay of the echo is intentionally tied to the viewer's attention span of 20 seconds as discussed in Part 1 of the paper. The echo causes a double take from the viewer and they are drawn back into the piece (Fig. 12). This component also encourages loud behavior that is taboo to the galleries and museums. *The Cave* also includes a mirror film that is placed on the gallery glass and is reflective on both sides. The exterior of the gallery having the viewer consider their own body before entering the space. It also acts as a barrier for the viewer's inside the cave (Fig. 4). Creating a moment of solidarity with their body and they can engage in an interaction that is removed from judgement or voyeurism. The Interior reflection acting as a flat surface that paints the viewer into the space of the exhibition as they interact with the sound component (Fig. 13). Further reaffirming that their interaction and experience is the focal point of the exhibition.

Process and Material

My art making process starts with a general idea, but ultimately, I let the process of working with a material dictate the direction or concept of the work. For example, if a piece of wood has a knot in it, I will not remove the knot. Instead, I will try and incorporate it into the overall design. I see this as working with the material to create a relationship with it. Working this way, I am not necessarily forcing the material to be a certain pattern or form; instead, I am actively monitoring how the material is changing through my manipulation. Often embracing spontaneous serendipitous moments in the materials or process. *Gut Feeling* was no exception to this method of working.

As sculpture is so expansive it has become, "infinitely malleable," and like many other contemporary media areas it is now often defined by what it is not (Krauss 30). However, its expanse is rapid. In *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* Rosalind Krauss sees two driving forces in sculpture, a focus on the individual artistic practice and the artist being liberated from conforming to one particular medium. With sculpture's short history and its expansive nature, it is not constrained to historical connotation or materials in the way that painting often is. As a sculptor I must start with a different set of questions. I must consider material choices as much as I must consider the content in which I want to convey. Not only to consider the materials historical contexts, but to consider if the material will even do what I need it to do. I must consider some of the following questions: Will It bend or break? Can the break serve my initial intension? Will certain paints work with this material or will it melt? Do I want it to melt? Is the material accessible? Do I have the resources to safely use this material?

For, *Gut Feeling*, I was concerned with two main goals as it pertains to material. First to use a material that did not have a traditional hierarchy over the viewer. I wanted the material to be approachable and have the sculpture be about the experience not about creating an aura

around the object. The second goal was to manipulate the chosen material so that it could move past its original function and be less identifiable. Through heavy manipulation I worked the steel and plastic into an ambiguous medium that makes the viewer question the materials, but not obstruct the experience. The layering of material and manipulation of the plastic with heat and paint I created a hybrid history to the material to encourage a slow looking textural experience.

The most prominent components to the construction of the forms was the steel armature. The large skeleton-like frames were constructed using extruded linear steel rods, often called pencil rod for its diameter. The practice of constructing armatures can be drawn back to the Renaissance era as they were used to create a rigid structure in which to build from. Presently they are more commonly used in the construction of monumental sculptures to provide addition interior support. However, I was not interested in the armature acting as a support, instead I wanted it to actively dictate the shape, size, and direction the forms flowed.

As the viewer moves around the forms, they can catch a glimpse of this understructure through the opaque surface of the membrane-like plastic that covers the forms. Though the forms have a whimsical movement that appears active, the armature freezes the movement into a static form. As it is such a vital structure that manipulates the forms so heavily, I cannot help but compare them to that of a prosthetic. They act as more of a guide for the surface layer.

Creating the organic curves was a highly physical process. Each piece of steel was bent by hand and fully engaged my own body in a test of flexibility, endurance, resilience, and strength. It became an empowering challenge confronting my body's limitations, but also a humbling one, as I had created a monumental sculpture in honor of the systems that keep us alive and make us who we are. Crawling and climbing through, under, and around these forms I had

an intimate moment with them that I can only hope is expressed through the layout and arrangement of the exhibition.

To design the armatures for this site-specific installation I first modeled the gallery space to scale using Rhino, a 3D modeling software. Though no digital fabrication was used to construct the forms, sketching them digitally became vital as the forms were very large and would need to be consistent in order to function together as a system. I broke apart the designs and exported them from Rhino into images, measurements, and vector lines. Replacing the CNC router blade with a sharpie marker, the machine elegantly drew the vector lines that would serve as the supportive side walls of the armatures. These series of blueprints defined the curve and direction the form moved while a series of bent circles defined the radius of the forms. Slip rolling each individual piece and bending the curves of the form in a vice grip, I could not help but reflect on how only a few hours earlier a simple click of a mouse button had determined the bend, curve, and radius of the forms. It is a sign of how new technology has rapidly sped up old traditional practices. Although the blueprints aided in achieving the desired scale and direction of the forms, there was plenty of room for interpretation. I was still able to have a conversation with the material, filling in where the blueprints fell short with organic gestures.

After each shape was bent, they were welded together through a delicate balancing act. The process forcing me to be conscious of my own body in relation to the tools and the forms being constructed. Geared up in welding leathers, gloves, and helmet I balanced on tables and ladders holding steel in one hand and welding with the other. The welding gun acting as an extension of my arm. The free-floating act of welding in space is one of empowerment and served as a fast way to create large gestures.

On top of the steel armature an application of plastic was applied. The plastic was heated to the armature thinning and stretching as it conformed to the contours of the armature. The heat created a texture of bubbles and wrinkles on the surface of the plastic. Dense areas of overlapping plastic mimicking cartilage. A fluorescent spray paint was then added to the surface of the plastic as an undercoat giving off its own visible light as a luminescent paint and provided a textural surface for the topcoat of paint. Acrylic was dry brushed to the surface in layers. Each layer of color mimicking the interior of the body and emphasizing the folds and wrinkles of the forms. The process is additive and subtractive, making the surface look highly worked and adding a layer of history to the material. Paint is rubbed into the surface with rags and sandpaper scratches through layers of paint to expose earlier layers (Fig. 14). The finished surface keeping its plastic visual wet sheen. The overlapping, layering and removal of surface reminds me of the processes our bodies cycle through as an ecosystem. Constantly sheading and regenerating cells. The dark and light areas of color contrast emphasize the movement of the forms. The highly worked textural surface encouraging slow looking and experience.

Body: The Abject Body and the Uncanny

Body is the center of my artistic practice. Whether it is abstract or representational my work revolves around the body's fragility and resilience as it faces internal, external, or phycological factors. I also consider how the functionality of our bodies dictates our experience of the world around us. For, *Gut Feeling*, I focused heavily on ideas of the abject body and on the viewer's own experience with their bodies in space. The abject body being the internal body or the body that violates its own boundaries (Covino 17). Elizabeth Grosz also refers to it as a, "result of recognizing that the body is more than, in excess of, "the clean and proper" (Grosz 78). We want our bodies to be neat and orderly because if this is the case, we perceive that we are in control of our bodies' functionality and how it exists. We are repulsed by our bodies when they try to unroot our illusion of control, grotesquely trying to exist outside the confines defined by our epidermis. This breach of boundaries is what, *Gut Feeling*, is interested in. The grotesque body or the uncanny parts of our bodies has a familiarity, but unsettling feeling as it has been socially suppressed topic. The critique of our own systems is directly relatable to museums as they do have a cosmetic face that is vastly different than their methods of operation.

As stated in earlier chapters, the forms address the abject body in different ways. Segment 1and the unseen implied transition between Segments 2, 3, and 4 represent the literal interpretation of the abject body, existing outside the gallery walls. The general representation of the abstracted tubular forms that are present in a majority of the body's systems. The presence of the mirror connects to theories of the Lacan's mirror stage. In Lacan's theory the mirror stage is a point when a young child recognizes themselves in the mirror and notices that their body is separate from everything they have been experiencing. Meaning that there is a boundary or limit to their physical body (Covino 17-19). *Gut Feeling* utilizes the gallery window and a mirror reflecting on the internal and external of the gallery. The exterior reflecting making the viewer

consider their own body before entering the metaphorical body of the gallery. The internal mirror reflecting the viewer's body as a part of the exhibition. It is a point that is both the acknowledgement that the viewer's body is separate from their environment, but also one of acknowledging that they are a part of the system that occupies the gallery. The gallery consumes the viewer while the viewer consumes it. As sound is recorded from the viewers' interaction in the space, filtered, and played back at the viewer. It is not only a visual cycle, but also an auditory cycle. It again acknowledges the viewer's presence and lets the viewer know of it. In a way, it makes the static system seem present with the viewer. I will also note that this acknowledgment and experience is meant to be one that is not concerned with the social or political aspects of the body, but identify the thread that connects all bodies that is the abject body. The part of ourselves that we disavow as they are a sign of disorder and reminds us of our limitations and mortality (Covino 17). I am not interested in presenting a feminist context to this body of work as I, like Judith Butler, believe that gender is a construct. I am instead solely interested in the functions of the body that are labeled impure or inappropriate for discussion or display.

The Unforeseeable Future: COVID-19

Like many other exhibitions, *Gut Feeling*, took a year to plan. During this time, I tried to foresee any complications that might arise and strategize how I would handle those specific situations. Like many other artists in my same position, I would have never imagined my exhibition would be postponed or canceled due to a pandemic. Two weeks before the scheduled installation date students were notified by the Chancellor via email that as of March 30th, 2020 campus would be shifting to online classes due to COVID-19 and that only faculty and graduate students would be allowed to continue research on campus. March 30th being the opening date for, *Gut Feeling*. The following day this mandate was escalated to March 16th. For me, this was a long week of uncertainty as no one knew how to handle the situation let alone give others guidance.

During that week I continued to paint my pieces for the exhibition, uncertain if anyone could view it. I had to consider how a show all about experience would be changed if it were presented on a digital platform rather than in person. It made me aware of how important the viewer was for this exhibition. In the past, I have had opening nights that were slim in attendance to say the least, but those places were in high traffic areas where the unexpected viewer could happen upon them and still have an experience with the works. This was not the same, no one could enter the building to see the exhibition and since the viewer had to reference their bodies in relation to the forms, they would have to be present to feel the full experience. Images cannot invoke the same feelings as something that occupies the same room as you. I am not saying that sculpture is a superior medium to photography, but rather that they both serve different functions and the function of this exhibition was heavily invested in the viewer's physical experience.

The atmosphere of the exhibition shifted with COVID-19 and in a few short months the term social distancing was developed. Creating a new global culture that was focused on monitoring one's body for the safety of other's bodies. In relation, this was a similar goal to *Gut Feeling*, which was to make the viewer focus on their body in relation to space and identify the string that connects us is the grotesque and our experiences. It seemed ironic that, *Gut Feeling* would be an exhibition that denied the viewer access due to unforeseeable circumstances of the body.

On March 18th, after working in an empty building for a week and having many conflicting responses on what would become of the exhibition, a new email emerged that campus would now be closed to faculty and graduate students. In the following days, instead of prepping for the installation of, *Gut Feeling,* I was frantically trying to get in-process documentation of the exhibition and cleaning out my studio, unaware if I would still have to do my oral defense and exhibition online. With no accessible space to accommodate the scale of my thesis work off campus, I joined the millions of people around the world and quarantined myself at my apartment. Thankfully, the indecision and fate of, *Gut Feeling,* was quickly resolved, and I was given approval to move my thesis defense and exhibition to Summer 2020.

The first week of June I was granted approval to install my exhibition as it was intended to be viewed and select faculty were able to gain approval to view it. While the public was not able to experience the exhibition, I did a series of Zoom tours in which I explained the mechanics of the exhibition and people were allowed to interact with the sound component of *The Cave* using my computer speakers. I am fully aware of the irony present in presenting this exhibition on Zoom since the exhibition begs for direct interaction. It felt as though I had demolished everything, I had laid out in *How Media Has Changed the Viewing Experience.* However,

presenting the exhibition in this manner created some unexpected outcomes including accessibility and desire. Presenting the exhibition digitally I had a larger variety or people in attendance stretching across the United States. Even through aspects of the exhibition are lost in a digital format, the exhibition still brought the visual components to everyone that attended. Desire was another unexpected aspect. After presenting this show on Zoom and posting images I was met with an extraordinary amount of demand to see it in person, to participate in an experience.

Epilogue

One of the most challenging things I learned during my time at the University of Arkansas School of Art was how to reassess the artist's duty and obligations to the viewer. Over the three-year period at the University I was constantly asked: "How do you want the viewer to read the work, What does this do for the viewer, Who is the ideal viewer and what is the ideal viewing space?" For me, this redirected how I considered artwork to be consumed. I not only had to conceptually connect my work to contemporary art and conceive a concept I wanted to address, I also had to consider how the viewer would ingest the work.

I was able to take a course called the Curatorial Art History, which was hosted by Crystal Bridges, Museum of American Art. Each week, the class was taught by different curators and they would explain how they select artworks, arrange spaces, and the processes in art history they draw from. It was a humbling experience that tied in well with my background in Art History and my previous History of Museums course at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Both courses highlighted the creation and evolution of the institution of the museum and how it functions currently as a result of its own history. These topics paired with questions of the viewer's projected experience with my artwork inspired me to create, *Gut Feeling*, as an exhibition that caters to the viewer's experience rather than being a platform that honors the artistic genius. The artwork is instead finished through the viewers interaction and experience with the sculptures.

Moving forward with my practice I foresee my work scaling down due to economics and the lost accessibility to working spaces, tools, and technology. I look to continue a cross-disciplinary approach to artmaking that engages a wide variety of materials and processes while considering the viewers experience with the artwork.

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Figures

Figure 1. *Gut Feeling* (Installation View) 2020. Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable. Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 2. *Gut Feeling: Segment 1* (Exterior Installation View) 2020. Mixed Media. 71 x 53 x 38 inch. Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 3. *Gut Feeling: Segments 1* (Exterior Installation View) 2020. Mixed Media. 71 x 53 x 38 inch. Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 4. *Gut Feeling* (Exterior Installation View) 2020. Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable. Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 5. *Gut Feeling: Segment 1 and 2*, 2020. Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable. Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 6. *Gut Feeling: Segment 2*, 2020. Mixed Media. 55 x 66 x 30 in. Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 7. *Gut: Feeling Segment 1, 2, and 3*, 2020. Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable.
Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 8. *Gut Feeling: Segment 3*, 2020. Mixed Media. 35 x 93 x 115 inch.
Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 9. *Gut Feeling: Segment 4*, 2020. Mixed Media. 117 x 84 x 96 inch.
Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 10. *Gut Feeling: The Cave*, 2020. Mixed Media. 132 x 144 x 96 inch.
Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 11. *Gut Feeling: The Cave,* 2020. Mixed Media. 132 x 144 x 96 inch.
Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 12. *Gut Feeling: The Cave,* 2020. Mixed Media. 132 x 144 x 96 inch.
Photo Shelby Fleming

Figure 13. *Gut Feeling: The Cave*, 2020. Mixed Media. 132 x 144 x 96 inch.
2:02 minute video: youtube.com/watch?v=Stwl5YvfsRI&t=12s
Photo and Video Shelby Fleming

Figure 14. *Gut Feeling* (Surface Detail Image), 2020. Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable.
Photo Shelby Fleming